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ABSTRACT

To develop empirical data relating to the composing process of college basic writers, a study was conducted involving four community college freshmen. Three of the students were basic writers; the fourth was judged by the faculty to have superior writing ability. The study utilized four types of data: interviews with each subject subsequent to each writing assignment, data provided by J. Emig's "composing aloud" method, the written piece itself, and biographical data on each student. It was found that in the preparation stage, no basic writer spent longer than two minutes before writing, and only one student showed evidence of any sort of planning before beginning to write. The basic writers appeared to view writing as a teacher-imposed task to be dispensed with. Once they began writing, they tended to write straight through with no false starts, rejected lines or paragraphs, or major transformations. The first sentence held special significance as it acted as a way of explaining the task to the writers, and no basic writer ever rejected, transposed, or substantially altered the first sentence once it was written. They spent little time on considerations of punctuation, using only the marks they were sure of. Their undeveloped skills made many of their correcting activities futile. Because basic writers have not developed a sense of language intention, their sense of writing is limited and limiting. They have also excluded prewriting influences from their writing. (TJ)

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THE WRITING PROCESS OF COLLEGE BASIC WRITERS

A hiatus now exists between theory and empirical data relating to writing. Theories developed by scholars such as James Britton (1970), George Kelly (1955), Michael Polanyi (1974), and Lev Vygotsky (1934) give firm support to a process-oriented methodology, but empirical data about student writing is strangely absent. Without the prescience offered by a characterization of student writing processes, and identification of the contributing elements and their interrelationships, our instructional efforts may often be misguided.

The many writing remediation centers which are proliferating across the campuses of Canadian colleges and universities share the task of instructing thousands of unprepared college writers. Wisely used class time will not, of course, limit itself to accidental aspects of composition which appear so prevalent in their written pieces, but will emphasize the essence of composition--the process, its dimensions and their interrelationships. However, information on the writing process of college basic writers is nearly nonexistent. Accounts by professional writers of their processes seem far removed from those of basic writers, most of whom are essentially non-writers in terms of output to date. Exciting work on process by researchers such as Janet Emig (1971) or Donald Graves (1973) examines either more able or much younger students.

The purpose of this paper is to present some highlights of a clinical study of the composing process of college basic writers. A characterization of the general elements involved in the writing process of college basic writers

is followed by a commentary on the important roles played by intention and prewriting.

Procedure

Constructing a Window into the Writing Process. Since the writing process is complex, individual, and abstruse, an attempt was made to view process from various angles in order to characterize it fully. The study utilized four types of data: (a) Interviews with each subject subsequent to each writing which raised questions based on the process as observed by the investigator as well as on the written piece itself. (b) Data provided by composing aloud, a method used by Emig (1971) in which writers verbalize internal decisions which contribute to their writing process. (c) The written piece itself, along with all drafts. (d) Biographical data on each student. These data contributed to the development of a writers' profile, as well as offering occasional explanations of observed writing behaviors.

Selecting Students Compatible with the Method. The students were community college freshmen. The three basic writers were all students who had been recommended by a faculty Language Arts committee, based on a one-hour writing sample, to take a basic writing course. To extend the range of the study, a fourth freshman was selected who was judged by faculty to have superior writing ability.

Designing Appropriate Writing Tasks. The writing tasks set for the students were deliberately open-ended. Because of expressive language's close relationship to thinking (Britton, 1975), writing in this mode was thought to provide the most direct access into the psychological process of writing.

Collecting the Data. Each subject met individually with the investigator for four separate, one-hour sessions over a ten-week period. Each meeting was designed to observe the writing process as it occurred in response

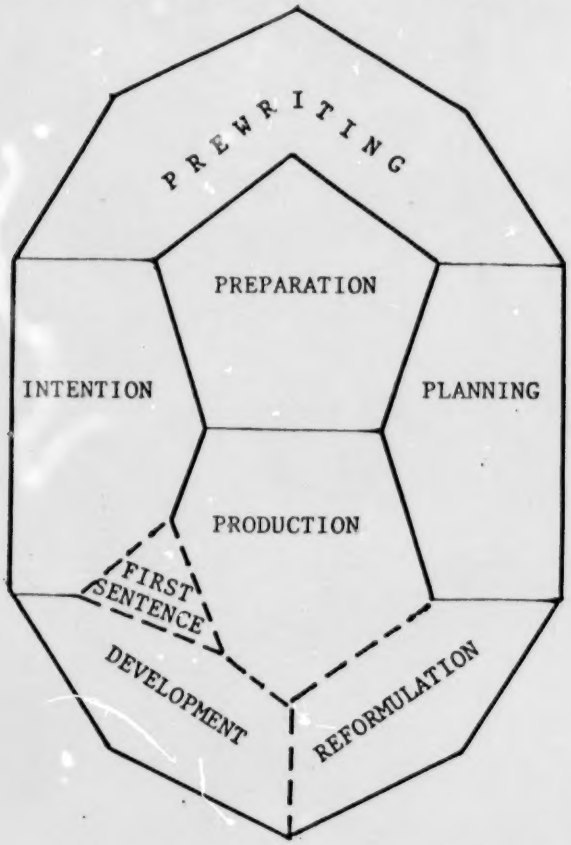
to varied stimuli. Session I--The students were asked to compose a piece in whatever mode and field of discourse they wished, in order that their ideation process could be studied. Session II--The students came prepared to write on an event or feeling of importance to them. Their planning process for this piece was examined. Session III--This biographical session began with their free writing on the word "English." Building upon their response, a taped discussion of their school history and verbal background followed. Session IV--The students were asked to compose an imaginative piece and were allowed to write at home over an extended period of time. This session provided a chance to study variations in process due to mode, as well as to free their process from the time and place restrictions imposed by the previous tasks.

Discussion of the Elements of Process

Since research is in an exploratory phase, absolute delineations of the writing process have yet to be agreed upon. A tripartite division into prewriting, writing and rewriting is common. Others, like Emig, have studied process in terms of many more categories. It seems most useful to me to remain with broad descriptive categories: I use the terms "preparation" and "production." Preparation includes all the mental, written and oral activities that may take place prior to the first draft, while production encompasses all the elements during the actual writing until completion of the piece. The amplitude of these categories serves as a reminder of the many physical and mental activities involved in each stage. As well, such broad categories can encompass idiosyncracies of individual patterns, as well as variations in process dependent on mode, stimulus and context.

However, some dimensions of the process--planning, prewriting, and intention--do not admit to neat categorization. For this reason, I have found a model to be useful in considering the writing process. The model I

have derived pictures the process as analogous to a multi-faceted crystal.



Model of the Writing Process

Each element of process, as each facet, is distinct, while still contributing synergistically to the three-dimensional depth of the whole. Additionally, just as light plays upon a crystal and emphasizes distinct facets, so do certain dimensions of the process at times appear more important than others, depending upon the individual, his topic, and his mode.

To succinctly characterize the writing process of the basic writers studied, it could be said that as they dealt with each dimension, their observable behaviors seemed both less complex and less personal than those of proficient writers.

In the preparation stage, no basic writer spent longer than two minutes before beginning to write, even when the topic was unspecified. This rapid digestion of task and immediate response is typical of school writers of all abilities and can be explained by a realistic look at school writing contexts. Don Graves' 1978 report on his international study of the status of writing noted that most schools allowed less than 30 minutes a week for writing.

Further, only one of the students studied showed evidence of any sort of planning--whether by conversation, outline or jotting--before beginning to write. The attitude of the remaining students was summed up as follows:

> Interviewer: You don't make an outline?
> Student: No.
> Interviewer: What about when you're doing term papers?
> Student: Outline them? I usually just took stuff out of books and wrote them down and then I put them in with the rest of the stuff.

Further, despite the importance that educators such as James Britton (1970) and Douglas Barnes (1973) give to the value of talk preceding writing, no writer studied had consciously used this strategy before beginning an assignment.

These students appeared to view writing as a teacher-imposed task to be dispensed with, along with the myriad of other tasks which confront them as students, rather than, in T. S. Eliot's terms, "a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate." These are students who rarely practice or perform on their own volition, yet are kept waiting in the wings for command performances.

Once into the production stage, they tended to write straight through their pieces. They did not have any false starts, rejected lines or paragraphs,

or major transformations. They began writing with the introductory sentence and continued uniformly through to the conclusion. It is this behavior which has led some observers to characterize their writing as linear. In reality, it is cyclical, as they are internally making continuous decisions which affect their written product.

Able writers have often commented on the difficulties, even the awesome qualities, of the first sentence, in which the writer needs to find an appropriate point of entrance for his readers. In a very different way, the first sentence also held special importance for basic writers as it acted as a way of explaining the task to them. Oral composing concurrent with writing well illustrated how this retention technique worked. For example, one writer verbalized his intention, then began his paper with a similar statement.

Composing Aloud	First Draft
I think I'll write about something I think about a lot. That's what it will be like when I've completed my education. As a matter of fact, I think about it daily so it shouldn't be too hard.	I think about what it will be like when I've completed by education. I have no idea what it will be like. That bothers me--as a matter of fact it scares me.

This brings up the second point of importance. No student ever rejected, transposed, or substantially altered the first sentence which he wrote. None used the technique of writing themselves into their papers; rather, the first sentence they wrote determined the remainder of their paper. As a student said, "In all my essays I always build my essay around my first sentence."

Even though the first sentence at times locked a writer into a pattern which was difficult to develop, or inappropriate to his purpose, he still retained the sentence and simply ignored its implications. The better writer also began her pieces with the writing of the opening sentences. She said, "I will spend a lot of time and I've sat for an hour with what I want to say. But I needed exactly the right words and until those words came I couldn't start to write." But unlike the basic writers, she was aware of the effect the opening had on the further development of her pieces.

While writing, the students spent little time on considerations of punctuation, as they used only the marks they were sure of. Their frequent pauses to attend to spelling always occurred when the word first appeared in the draft, and not in their final draft or proofreading. Each used an individual spelling method, all of which were unsuccessful. One writer attempted to limit her written vocabulary to words she could spell. Another tried to sound out words phonetically, but often lost track of the word he sought, as when he wrote "benefits" for "beneficial." The third writer used a dictionary for unfamiliar words but let familiar ones slip by misspelled.

Since reformulation occurred concurrently with writing and not as a final step, it is best considered as an element of the production stage. Reformulation is possible at the correcting, revising or rewriting level; the basic writers concentrated their efforts at the correcting level. However, their undeveloped skills at punctuation, spelling, proofreading,and assuming a reader's viewpoint coalesced to make many of their correcting activities futile.

Proofreading was not an established part of their writing behavior. When it occurred, students glossed over surface errors and the deep, intended meaning was relied on to carry the meaning. In one extreme example, a writer had to miscue 25 percent of the words he had written in order to make sense of his piece in his oral proofreading. Interestingly, neither in this case nor in any other did a writer make any changes as a result of proofreading.

Role of Intention

Two major elements of the model remain to be discussed--intention and prewriting. Many language theories have recognized two functions of language and have variously named them. Cassirer (1953) distinguishes the "reproductive" function from the "productive and constructive" function while Gusdorf (1953) writes of the "communicative" as opposed to the "expressive" function. The idea behind the division is that language not only communicates(social intention) but that it is also a means of discovery for the user (productive, expressive intention). Both these complementary functions should be activated in the preparation stage as well as during the production stage when a writer's examination of his own feelings and experiences is balanced with a careful choosing of words which will enhance communication to a reader.

Basic writers are writers who have not developed a full sense of language intentions. They have internalized a sense of writing which is limited and limiting. The heuristic possibilities of writing are left untapped by them, and their writing, rather than being a symbolization of meaning, becomes instead a narrow, teacher-directed activity which offers no satisfaction to them, nor, usually, to their teachers. As a result,

their concept of themselves as writers grows increasingly negative. Often during their writing, when they paused to reread, they would say aloud, "This sounds stupid." The more proficient student, on the other hand, offered self-congratulatory comments.

It seems that an underdeveloped heuristic intention results in a diminished sense of communicative intention as well. This atrophic condition was diagnosed by one writer in discussing the fear fellow students had of self-expression in their school writing:

> I've talked to a lot of people, you know, that are in English and they've got the same problem as I do. And they just spend all their time just thinking what to say. Well, you know, it's not hard to say anything, and a lot of things make sense. It's just if you're scared to say them, or scared of what people are going to think of them.
>
> Then pretty soon you really can't say anything and it's no longer a sense of being scared. It's a sense of having lost the ability, or having just pushed it so far down in you.

Intention towards making meaning is an important factor in distinguishing basic writers from more able ones. The intention brought to writing is dependent upon a person's view of writing, and this view determines the use writers make of prewriting.

Role of Prewriting

Prewriting is only remotely related to the actual time immediately preceding an assignment. It is better considered as the active mental engagement between a writer and his topic during which time a pattern is imposed on experience. Although we know from established writers how necessary this active engagement between a writer and his topic is, it seems that basic writers purposely exclude prewriting influences from their writing, developing their pieces without contributions from their peronal web of meaning. Yet without a person at the center of the writing process, it becomes as purposeless as much school sponsored writing is.

It seems that these writers have excluded prewriting influences from their writing for one or both of two reasons: a) previous attempts to integrate their personal experiences with their topics have been critically received; or b) they have developed a sense of writing as a school task initiated by and for the teacher, and one in which personal involvement is inappropriate.

Even when writing about meaningful, important personal experiences basic writers tended to superficially report events, and present their material devoid of interpretations. By not drawing on prewriting, it was found that their pieces were presented at a lower presentational level, according to Moffett's (1968) hierarchy, than those pieces which built from the writer outward. Those writers who did not discover useful relationships between events in their prewriting, or who chose not to draw on thier prewriting, tended to produce narrative pieces in the reporting level. The writers who organized their experiences first in prewriting were able to write at the higher level of generalizing, and were able to use language as a means of going beyond experience. The reconstructions their writing allowed them in turn gave them a full sense of the complementary functions of language.

Altering the Writing Process

Most of our instructional efforts with basic writers on planning, outlining, thesis and proofreading have been less than useful. These writers are not beginning, malleable writers, but already have existing patterns of writing--patterns very different from ones we teach, and ones unlikely to be changed by a lecture. The more minor modifications we insist upon--using the dictionary, indenting, using periods correctly--must seem

unnecessary and unimportant to students who already look upon their writing as personally unfulfilling.

A more appropriate and rewarding focus for our teaching is the students themselves. Basic writers' existing patterns of composing are effective for them in terms of their construct of writing, a construct which supports their limited view of writing and their low self-concepts as writers. It seems likely that they can subsume very few alternative behaviors until they widen their view of writing as well as build their writing confidence. Such changes would allow them to gradually alter their constructs of writing, resulting in the need to substitute more appropriate behaviors for the disfunctional ones. By encouraging writers to explore the full range of language functions and relate their writing to their world of meaning, the writing process would expand from a list of behaviors to a dynamic source of personal extension and exploration.

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